

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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Nearly three years ago, the Cleveland Museum of Art began work on a Bicentennial exhibition with an unusual point of view, focusing on America not as we have experienced it, but as others have perceived it.

The result of this provocative concept is The European Vision of America, a collection of nearly 350 works of art gathered from important public and private collections in more than a dozen European countries as well as Canada and the United States.

The exhibition, which premiered at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in December, opens at the Cleveland Museum on May 5 and remains there through the Bicentennial anniversary, closing on August 8. From Cleveland the show travels to its final destination, the Grand Palais in Paris, where it will be on view September 17 through January 3, 1977.

Following its Washington opening, the exhibition was acclaimed for the new perspective it provides of our nation's history. Yet among all the works on display, not one was done by an American artist.

Rather, the image of the two continents known as America is refracted through European eyes, weaving a detailed and vivid narrative which evokes both the myth and the reality of the new golden land from the time of Columbus' landfall to the closing years of the 19th century.

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The exhibition has been organized by the Cleveland Museum with the cooperation of the National Gallery in Washington and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux de France, and is supported by grants from the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts. A further gift from Central National Bank of Cleveland makes possible admission-free showing in Cleveland.

Hugh Honour, English scholar and writer, is guest curator and has prepared the exhibition catalogue (The European Vision of America, 400 pages, 368 illustrations, 8 in color; \$17.50 hardbound, \$9.00 softbound).

To illustrate the sweep of the European vision, art historian Honour has brought together a stunning array of objects: paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, furniture, tapestries, silver, porcelain and etched glass as well as rare early maps and books.

Like the shifting images of a kaleidoscope, these varied works record fact and fantasy, conjecture and observation as the artists of Europe, reflecting the temper of their times, attempted to come to terms with a world markedly different from their own.

"From the very beginning," Honour notes in the catalogue, "the American reality seems to have been too strange, too alien for most Europeans, and especially artists, to assimilate."

The need to render the unknown in familiar terms can be seen in the earliest work in the exhibition: a 1493 woodcut depicting the landing of Christopher Columbus. Highly stylized, as if it were illustrating an episode in Renaissance chivalric literature, it shows King Ferdinand of Spain on his throne watching three little ships crossing a narrow stream of water; on the far shore, a group of classically-proportioned Indians stroll, oblivious of the imminent landing.

3-european vision of america

Perhaps the brightest and sharpest visions of early America are those of the 16th century cartographers. The exhibition includes several rare maps, among them one showing the new world territories of Spain and Portugal in 1558 from an atlas believed to have been made for England's Mary Tudor at the time of her marriage to Philip II of Spain.

There also are 10 magnificent watercolors by John White, Sir Walter Raleigh's cartographer and draughtsman on the Roanoke expedition, which record with sensitivity and accuracy the Indians, fish, birds and flowers White observed.

Others who captured the American scene with great precision were the early naturalists and botanists, and one section of the exhibition is devoted to their beautiful, meticulous drawings. But while new world plants -- maize, tobacco, the potato and cotton -- were to play an enormous role in the life of Europe, it was the inhabitants of the Americas who provided the most compelling and enduring image.

The feather-bedecked Indian made a prompt appearance in European works of art, and by the late 16th century a robust female figure in feather skirt and headdress had come to symbolize the new world. She appears in paintings and sculpture, and as a motif on ceramics, glass, playing cards, silver and wallpaper.

One of the most spectacular of these allegorical images is the jewel-encrusted silver sculpture, America, created by Lorenzo Vaccaro in 1692. The work, which is reproduced on the exhibition poster, depicts a young woman sitting majestically atop an intricately engraved globe illustrating the two American continents. Lent by the Cathedral Treasury in Toledo, Spain, the sculpture has never before been exhibited outside the Cathedral.

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It was not until almost 100 years later, in the last quarter of the 18th century, that European interest shifted from the exotic and fanciful to the dramatic realities of colonial dissent. The events and personalities of the American Revolution quickly found their way into works of art ranging from political cartoons to grandiose allegories.

European interest in the leaders of the American Revolution was intense, and their portraits were reproduced in paintings, drawings, sculpture, medallions -- even on tea cups. The great French portrait sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon made several busts of Benjamin Franklin, including the superb marble of 1780 included in the exhibition. Also on view are the Houdon busts of George Washington, naval hero John Paul Jones and Robert Fulton, inventor of the steam engine.

In the years following the Revolution, the Indian again emerged as a popular subject for European artists, but now visualized as Noble Savage. The exhibition includes a number of paintings from this period, among them two superb canvases: Joseph Wright's Indian Widow (1785) and Eugène Delacroix's Les Natchez (1824-1835).

Unlike the Indian, black Americans did not begin to engage the European imagination until the late 18th century. A French watercolor of 1770 shows a black slave happily cutting sugar cane; but a very different picture of the lot of black people is presented by A.F. Biard's 1835 painting, The Slave Trade.

The relentless commitment to the cause of black freedom found numerous advocates among Europe's artists, including the brilliant J.M.W. Turner whose 1840 oil, The Slave Ship, is one of the most haunting and powerful visualizations of the tragedy of slavery.

As the United States moved toward its first centennial in the post-civil war years, it was a country in the throes of momentous social and economic transition.

No artist captured this texture of American life so well as the Swiss-born Frank Buchser. Abandoning nearly all the accepted European images of America, he simply painted what he saw: America's black population freed from slavery but barely emerging from destitution; the American Indian way of life quickly drawing to a close with the coming of the railroad.

The exhibition will be installed in the special exhibition galleries on the first and second floors of the Museum. In addition to the catalogue, a smaller booklet, Notes on an Exhibition, has been prepared by the Museum's Art History and Education Department, and is available free of charge.

A series of guest lectures, gallery talks, courses, and audio-visual programs also have been scheduled in conjunction with the exhibition.

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